

Ag Essential During Stay-At-Home Order

Farmers and ag businesses will continue to serve Alabama residents under a stay-at-home order Gov. Kay Ivey issued April 3.

The order, aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19, continues through April 30, unless extended.

"I plead with you to do your part to stop the spread of COVID-19," Ivey said. "We've got to take this order dead serious; otherwise... more people will end up dying."

Agriculture and farms are exempt from the order as "essential businesses and operations."

Exempt activities include food cultivation; livestock, cattle, poultry and seafood operations; transporting ag products; livestock auctions; feedlots, dealers and brokers of livestock; farmers markets; feed stores; repairers and suppliers of ag equipment; gas, diesel and petroleum suppliers; companies involved with aquaculture, horticulture and crop protection products, including pesticide, herbicide and fertilizer producers and distributors; forest products businesses, including forestry operations, logging and manufacture of lumber and paper products; meat processing facilities, rendering facilities and transporters; feed processing facilities; and veterinary services.

The order does not require special paperwork for travel related to essential business operations, and the Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries is not issuing travel documents at this time. However, a sample letter is available at agi.alabama.gov.

The stay-at-home order exempts certain activities, including leaving home for food, medicine or to care for family members.

Share Farm Views With #StillFarming



Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, farmers are encouraged to share how they are working to provide a healthy and affordable food supply by using #StillFarming on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook posts. The American Farm Bureau Federation organized the campaign. Photo courtesy Autauga Farming Co. in Autauga County

Farmers Eligible For Forgivable Loans

Alabama farms, nurseries and other ag businesses may be eligible for forgivable loans under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act.

Alabama Farmers Federation National Affairs Director Mitt Walker said the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) is designed to help small businesses and employees weather the economic downturn. The \$2 trillion package includes \$349 billion for the PPP.

"The program helps small businesses keep employees on the payroll by providing guaranteed loans, which may be forgiven," Walker said.

Eligible businesses include limited liability companies (LLC), S corporations, sole proprietorships, contractors, and nonprofits with 500 or fewer employees. Loans are capped at \$10 million but can include up to eight weeks of average monthly payroll costs from last year plus an additional 25% of non-payroll costs. Other calculations apply to seasonal and new businesses. The PPP ends June 30.

According to the Small Business Administration (SBA), PPP loans will be forgiven if all employees are kept or quickly rehired and compensation levels are maintained for eight weeks.

To be forgiven, funds must be for:

- Payroll and benefits
- Mortgage interest incurred before Feb. 15, 2020
- Rent, under lease agreements in force before Feb. 15, 2020
- Utilities, for which service began before Feb. 15, 2020.

SBA anticipates a high subscription rate. As a result, non-payroll costs are likely to be capped at not more than 25% of the total loan amount. Borrowers will still owe money if the loan is used for non-qualified expenses or if staff and payroll are not maintained.

Applications are open for small businesses and sole proprietorships and open April 10 for independent contractors and the self-employed.

Visit SBA.gov for a list of SBA lenders.

Farmers To Plant More Corn, Wheat

Alabama farmers will plant more corn and wheat this year, but less cotton, peanuts and soybeans, according to the Prospective Plantings Report released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture March 31.

Farmers decisions are greatly influenced by the economy, said the Alabama Farmers Federation's Carla Hornady. Fluctuating markets, weather, unstable foreign trade, and in some cases erratic buying habits of consumers, all can influence farmers' decisions, she said.



"Commodity prices, along with other factors, play heavily into planting decisions," said Hornady, the Federation Cotton, Soybean and Wheat & Feed Grain divisions director. "Farmers look to plant crops that will make their farms profitable. Current market prices are making those decisions difficult."

Farmers throughout the country were surveyed the first two weeks of March for the report prepared by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS).

Cotton will remain the top crop grown in Alabama, if NASS predictions materialize. Farmers reported intentions to plant 530,000 acres of cotton, down

2% from last year's 540,000 acres. Corn is still a staple crop for Alabama farmers, who say they'll plant 370,000 acres this year. That's an increase of 50,000 acres more than last year. If realized, this will be the largest acreage since 1985.

Soybean acres are expected to drop by 5,000 acres from 2019, with an estimated 260,000 acres this year. Alabama peanut acres are expected to increase slightly, from 160,000 acres in 2019 to 165,000 acres this year.

Wheat is a cool-season crop, often planted by Alabama farmers as a cover crop or as a predecessor to a late soybean crop. NASS reports state farmers will buck the national trend of fewer acres by planting 150,000 acres this year – that's 20,000 acres more than 2019.

However, Alabama farmers dedicate more land to hay than they do other crops. Hay is harvested for cattle, horses and other livestock. Alabama's forecast predicts acreage to remain steady at 700,000 acres – the same as last year.

NASS estimates 97 million acres of corn will be planted in the U.S., up 8% from last year. National soybean acreage is predicted to be 83.5 million acres, up 10% from last year, and U.S. cotton acres are estimated to be 13.7 million acres, down less than 1% from 2019. Wheat acreage estimates of 44.7 million acres are down 1% from last year and represent the lowest since records began in 1919.

Vital Testing Labs Still Open For Business

To help ensure farmers have the resources they need during the coronavirus pandemic, agricultural testing labs on the Auburn University campus are open and accepting samples. Soil and forage testing, in addition to plant diagnostics, is available.

"These labs provide farmers with important information on soil fertility, plant diseases as well as forage analysis," said Mike Phillips, Alabama Cooperative Extension System assistant director.

Extension agents and specialists are working from home during the crisis. For contact information to help analyze report results, visit the Directory tab at aces.edu.

COVID-19 Impact Ripples Across Farm Country

From dairy farmers with nowhere to send their milk and cattle ranchers reeling from plummeting beef prices, the impact of the coronavirus is rippling through farm country, according to an American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) report April 3. Corn, cotton and soybean futures tumbled, ethanol plants idled, and some fruit and vegetable farmers are finding their best option is not picking produce.

Price forecasts for most agricultural products are bleak. In the past month, dairy prices dropped 26-36%, corn futures dropped by 14%, soybean futures are down 8% and cotton futures plummeted 31%. Hog futures are down by 31%. A surge in demand for beef emptied grocery store meat aisles, but there is no lack of supply. Despite a rise in retail prices in some areas, the prices paid to cattle ranchers have fallen 25%.

"After years of a down farm economy and damaging severe weather, the COVID-19 ripple effects are forcing farmers and ranchers to face heartbreaking financial realities," said AFBF President Zippy Duvall.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has not announced how it will distribute aid from a \$2 trillion stimulus package. Farmers reliant on direct consumer sales, such as farmers' markets and U-pick farms, are also facing dramatic losses.

Get Ag-tive

Coronavirus's effects on agriculture are outlined on a webpage accessible through AlfaFarmers.org. Alabama Farmers Federation staff continually update the page.

Consumers looking for locally grown produce can visit tinyurl.com/

findlocalnow for updated lists of Sweet Grown Alabama produce.

Webinars on various agricultural topics are available through the Alabama Cooperative Extension System at aces.edu and on its Facebook page.

Farm & Land Expo Seeks Exhibitors For Aug. 1 Event

The Alabama Farm & Land Expo is seeking exhibitors for its event in Mobile Aug. 1, held in conjunction with the Alabama Farmers Federation's commodity-focused conference July 30-Aug. 1.

Interested exhibitors should contact the Federation's Brittany Daniel at bdaniel@alfafarmers.org. Attendees

include farmers, cattlemen, forest owners, equipment enthusiasts and more.

Registration for the conference section of the Farm & Land Expo opens April 30 at AlfaFarmers.org. Other conference events include tours, speakers, general sessions and Young Farmers Division award ceremonies.

COMMODITY CORNER

GREENHOUSE, NURSERY & SOD

Alabama Farmers Federation staffers and Alabama Nursery & Landscape Association Director Russell Wood have worked with state officials to ensure horticulture, including greenhouses, nurseries and retail garden centers, is considered "essential" through the coronavirus pandemic. All garden centers and retail outlets must adhere to state rules concerning social distancing.

-Hunter McBrayer, division director

POULTRY

Poultry remains strong during the novel coronavirus, with Alabama-based hatcheries setting 34 million eggs, up 12% from this time last year. Alabama continues to see an increase in the number of eggs set and chicks placed in 2020 from this time a year ago, while neighboring states have not seen the same growth.

-Russ Durrance, division director

BEEF

The effects of African Swine Fever have left top export markets for U.S. meat searching for alternative protein options. Recent trade deals and record meat production numbers in the first quarter of 2020 suggest the U.S. is well positioned to fill this need in overseas markets.

-Brady Ragland, division director

PEANUTS

Peanut growers are gearing up for planting season. Quality concerns with the 2019 crop could impact the quality of this year's seed crop. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the Alabama Peanut Producers Association office in Dothan is open by appointment only.

-Jacob Davis, executive director

WILDLIFE

For most of the state, spring turkey season runs through May 3. If you are practicing social distancing by hunting the state's official game bird, please remember to record your harvest through GameCheck. For more information on hunting seasons and GameCheck, visit outdooralabama.com.

-William Green, division director

SOYBEAN

A cool, wet winter set the stage for cooler soil temperatures and high moisture levels in fields. These elements could create the perfect environment for diseases to take hold, resulting in an economic loss for farmers. Alabama Cooperative Extension System specialists say soybeans infected with a seedling disease are typically weak and less vigorous, which can cripple stand establishment. Learn how to submit plant samples at aces.edu.

-Carla Hornady, division director

Partner Profile: Harkess Joins Auburn Faculty

Alabama farmers have a new researcher in their corner. Alex Harkess was recently hired as a research faculty member through Auburn University (AU) and the HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology in Huntsville.

Harkess joins the AU College of Agriculture as a faculty member in the Department of Crop, Soil and Environmental Sciences.

Harkess specializes in plant reproductive, evolutionary and comparative genomics. His previous research focused on the evolution and function of small RNA pathways, the evolution of plant chromosomes and broad-scale comparative genomics.

HudsonAlpha's work in plant genomics includes research on genetic markers that can help make agriculture more efficient through increased yields, improved disease resistance and reduced water use.

Harkess earned his doctorate from the University of Georgia and a bachelor's in botany from the University of Miami.

This is the first in a series highlighting researchers and Extension staff working on behalf of Alabama farmers.



Harkess

Wet Winter Affecting Forages, Livestock

Coming out of the wettest winter on record, Alabama farmers face a different set of obstacles this spring.

Kim Mullenix, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System animal science specialist, said cattle could need additional supplementation.

"As cattle make the transition from winter to spring, producers should body condition score their herds to determine if additional supplementation is needed," Mullenix said. "Cattle have greater maintenance requirements when they are in muddy, wet conditions for an extended period of time because they expend extra energy walking through these conditions."

The increased rainfall may have producers changing their feeding schedule. Beef cattle producers should prepare to feed hay longer into early

spring than normal. Mullenix said feeding hay longer will allow pastures to dry out and rest.

Spring is traditionally another wet season for Alabama. If that trend holds, forages may suffer. Most forages can handle flooding for seven to 10 days. However, if subjected to continuous flooding, it will likely kill the plants.

The rain may have also delayed applications of fertilizer to forages. Once a field is dry enough to cross with equipment, Extension experts recommend farmers apply supplemental nitrogen.

Farmers should base this application on the recommendations to fulfill that crop's needs. Contact an Alabama Extension animal sciences and forages regional agent for help determining nitrogen fertilizer recommendations.

Broadband Grants To Benefit 17 Counties

Gov. Kay Ivey has announced \$9.5 million in broadband grants. The grants, part of the Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund, were awarded to nine broadband providers to fund multiple projects.

The grants' importance was underscored as students and employees transitioned to telework during the COVID-19 crisis.

Affected counties include Autauga, Bibb, Butler, Chilton, Coffee, Colbert, Covington, Crenshaw, Dallas, Geneva, Houston, Lauderdale, Lowndes, Mobile, Montgomery, Pike and Randolph.

Virtual Field Trips Held Each Friday

How do peanuts grow? When do Alabama farmers grow different fruits and vegetables? What's the difference between a cow, a bull and a calf?

Alabama farmers will answer those questions and more during Virtual Field Trips offered through Facebook Live on the Alabama Farmers Federation Facebook page Fridays at 10 a.m. through May 22.

"Parents and their children are making huge adjustments as their homes become classrooms, and we want to help by offering entertaining and educational field trips from some of our farmers," said Jeff Helms, the Federation's Communications Department director. "While these videos will target third- through fifth-graders, people of all ages will learn more about how farmers grow food, fiber and timber."

Viewers are encouraged to ask questions through the comment section, and each video will include links to educational activities.

Scheduled topics are:

- April 10 - Fruits and vegetables

- April 17 - Beef cattle
- April 24 - Honeybees
- May 1 - Catfish
- May 8 - Greenhouse and nursery products
- May 15 - Forestry
- May 22 - Cotton and other row crops

To receive Facebook notifications about the Virtual Field Trips, respond as "Interested" in the event or follow the Alabama Farmers Federation page.

The Federation's Mary Wilson encourages farmers to share the upcoming field trips on their personal and farm Facebook pages so members of their communities know to tune in.

"I know this is uncharted territory for a lot of parents and students. By Fridays at 10 in the morning, parents might be at the end of their rope trying to figure out what they'll do to keep the kids engaged," said Wilson, the Federation's director of news services. "Also, I hope viewers will share photos of them participating in the additional activities that we link to in the tours. They'll be fun and educational for the entire family!"

Event Changes Due To COVID-19 Pandemic

The Peanut Referendum vote originally scheduled for April 9 has been postponed due to the stay-at-home order from Gov. Kay Ivey. All eligible peanut producers will be notified of the rescheduled date as soon as it becomes available. Learn more at ALPeanuts.com.

The Beef Tour to South Dakota has been canceled for 2020. The Alabama Farmers Federation plans to visit the Midwest state in 2021.

Alabama Ag in the Classroom Teacher Workshop, originally slated for May 27-29 in Opelika, has been rescheduled for Sept. 11-12 in the same location. Applications for the free professional development for teachers are due Aug. 15 at AlabamaAITC.org.

The Jr. Beef Expo is postponed. Originally scheduled for March 19-21 in Montgomery, exhibitors and their parents are encouraged to visit JrBeefExpo.org for updates.

Walker County Donation Helps Feed Hungry Neighbors

Farmers are great neighbors. Just ask thousands of Walker County residents who recently received a helping hand from members of their county Farmers Federation.

"When we learned there were people in our county who were hungry, our board took action without hesitation," said Walker County Farmers Federation President Dorman Grace.

The Federation purchased \$5,000 of food at reduced prices from Son's Supermarket in Jasper, with help from local owners Jimmy and Todd Lee.

The Walker Area Community Foundation (WACF) helped connect the Federation to the Salvation Army and St. Mary's Episcopal Church pantry for ongoing food distributions.

"We're farmers; it's in our nature to help people," said Grace, who, with wife Susan and sons Cade and Jud, operate Grace Farms near Jasper. "This is something we feel strongly about. When people in our county are hurting, the Farmers Federation is here to help. When our members pay their dues,

it's important for them to know we are helping people in our county – our friends and neighbors."

WACF President Paul W. Kennedy described the Federation's contribution as an investment in the local community.

"Bless you," Kennedy told Grace and other Federation members. "Bags of protein and shelf-stable goods were distributed by St. Mary's to locations around Walker County with the help of volunteers, churches and agencies. Thanks to this investment, the St. Mary's food pantry offered fresh produce purchased through Son's Grocery for its regular food distribution for the first time in a long time."

St. Mary's also worked with the Salvation Army and volunteers who are delivering groceries to nearly 300 seniors who are self-isolating or have transportation challenges, Kennedy said. The funds will help both agencies continue to offer much-needed food into the future, he added.

The Federation is humbled by the appreciation from

Kennedy and other groups, Grace said. He added he believes difficult times often bring out the best in people.

"I hope this donation encourages others to be a blessing to those who are in need," Grace said.

